

## **A Teacher's Re-definition of Elementary Level Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the author responds to the call by Darling-Hammond (1999) for “a new kind of teaching.” Based on insights gained from 12 years as an elementary teacher in northern New York State, the author examines the work of “exemplary teachers” and underscores the importance of administrative support for them. The article challenges teachers and administrators alike to re-define their work based on assumptions and strategies consistent with constructivist theory.

### **Introduction**

Six years ago, Linda Darling-Hammond challenged our profession to develop a new kind of teaching, claiming that the traditional models for teaching were no longer effective.

Students learn best when new ideas are connected to what they already know and have experienced; when they use real-world problems to apply and test their knowledge; when they are given clear, high goals with much practice in reaching them; when they can build on what they have learned; and when their own interests and strengths are a springboard for learning. The complex learning needed to use knowledge for problem-solving and invention rather than rote recall depends on immensely skillful teaching that does far more than “cover the curriculum.” It requires teachers who can present critical ideas in powerful ways and systematically organize a learning process that builds on students’ prior knowledge and addresses their different needs. Expert teachers need to be diagnosticians and planners who can take all of the variables into account and teach in a reciprocal relationship to their students’ learning. The task is not one that can readily be “teacher proofed” through curriculum packages, textbooks, or testing systems, as schools have tried to do for most of this [20<sup>th</sup>] century. To teach so that all students actually learn, teachers must learn about their disciplines so that they can translate what they know into effective curriculum, teaching strategies and assessments.

(Darling-Hammond, 1999, 29)

In this article, I present a re-definition of *exemplary teaching* on the elementary level, based on Darling-Hammond's suggestions and on concepts consistent with Constructivist Theory in education. I also discuss how school administrators need to support this new kind of teaching.

### **A. The Work of Exemplary Teachers**

In my classroom, I have found that children learn best when they make personal connection between their interests, the stated curriculum and the real world around us. I capitalize on their spontaneity, curiosity, and appetite for knowledge while responding to their immediate "need to know" by integrating real world problems to solve, thus refining their thinking and their skills. Dewey, Vygotsky and Reggio educators see an intrinsic connection between social processes, curriculum and children's educational experiences (Hendrick, 2004). I, too, believe that exemplary teaching that meets the vision offered by Darling-Hammond at the elementary level requires the creation of group activities in which children share materials, ideas and insights and where they have a chance to make observations, and use their skills to test their theories within a safe community setting.

There are four characteristics considered necessary to the practice of *exemplary teaching*:

#### **1. Teaching on the balls of your feet**

Each day I teach on "the balls of my feet," ready to dart one way or another to follow the individual students' paths of learning unfolding in front of me. I have found that a teaching approach that incorporates constructivist practices (Flynn,

Mesibov, Vermette and Smith, 2004), an emergent curriculum (Jones and Nimmo, 1994) and/or a negotiated curriculum (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998), and the project approach (Katz and Chard, 2000) is a sure recipe for both in-depth understanding and life-long learning.

Using these approaches mean that many things are happening at once and I must be aware, energetic, sensitive and flexible to advance every students growth. Exemplary teachers have the knowledge, commitment and energy to be diagnosticians and planners; they can take many variables into account and teach in a reciprocal relationship to their students' learning. I believe that my careful attempts at scaffolding every student's thinking has largely been responsible for their growth and their meaningful understanding of increasingly complex ideas.

## **2. Remain Flexible Enough to Let Your Students Guide Your Teaching**

During the course of the day, my elementary students fade in and out of receptivity. As an effective teacher, I observe and I listen to my students: their actions speak louder than their words. Exemplary teachers stay alert, taking in their students' cues, remaining flexible enough to modify lessons. Noticing that eyes are sparkling or dull suggests that doors to the mind are open or shut: these provide data for my decision-making.

Teachers that rely on firm schedules or the modern canned and scripted programs will never open those students' eyes or minds. Such non-professional "teacher-proof" programs are the antithesis of the future called for by Darling-Hammond. The exemplary teacher should be motivated by the radiant glow of joy in the eyes of learners that results from their experimentation, exploration, discovery

and understanding; not from their progression through a tightly planned and canned system.

### **3. Individualize Whenever Possible, Using Centers**

Exemplary teachers individualize learning at every opportunity. In my classroom, this is often accomplished by the use of literacy centers. My learning centers create opportunities for students to practice, reinforce and extend learning; to inquire, analyze and solve problems; to probe, explore or satisfy curiosity; and to be artistic, creative, dramatic or imaginative (Harper, 2004). I routinely modify or replace materials and activities as student interests, needs, capabilities and developmental progress change. Doing so insures that students are actively engaged in learning which reflects and accommodates their individual learning styles.

As I see it, the use of centers provides an in-depth and personalized structure that permits choice, a sense of freedom, fun, and flexible collaboration. It allows me to give individual attention as warranted. Moreover, it allows me to send students the message that I care and respect them and value their work. Centers provide me with frequent opportunities to recognize student competence. With this structured, yet flexible framework, my students are given *voice* and *choice* about modes of inquiry, a variety of materials and the time to explore: the result is a sense of community, improved understandings and a classroom reflective of Darling-Hammond's "redefinition."

### **4. Teachers must Learn about Learning**

As teachers, we must learn about thinking processes as well as about the structures and modes of inquiry of the disciplines, so that we can update and

translate what we know into effective teaching strategies. Teachers learn about student learning when they study it. When student learning is “audible and visible” (Project Zero, 2001), teachers can use the documentation strategies of Reggio-style schooling: they can revisit student work to analyze and interpret what has really happened. Teachers are thus transformed into the kind of diagnosticians that make us more effective.

I use documentation as a reflective tool to analyze my students’ learning efforts. This has given me opportunities to understand the role of factors that I may not have recognized previously. It has allowed me great growth, as it has been the key to the refinement of my practice over the past few years.

Interestingly, in my recent role as Teacher Education Adjunct at Niagara University, it has been the development of Centers and use of Documentation strategies that have been most beneficial to the veteran K-12 teachers with whom I have worked. The alignment between these two instructional practices and the vision offered by Darling-Hammond is very close, and they can provide the springboards needed build the “new classroom.”

## **B. Elements of a New School Administration**

Visionary teachers require visionary administrators who are flexible and supportive. “Teaching on the balls of one’s feet” is exhausting. Keeping the centers up and running is tiring work. Documentation processes are lengthy and require demanding attention to detail. To stay alert to the learning needs of my students each day, I need a support system that includes an administration that (a) welcomes new ideas and is flexible with change and (b) supports the professional development

that I need and seek. In short, I need the independence and freedom to be a true professional.

Exemplary teachers require a constructivist administration that is open-minded, supportive of change, and dedicated to improving educational standards both for children and teachers. A supportive administration is marked by responsive leadership: those managers that cling to traditional modes of authoritarian command often chase innovative and energized teachers out of the school. Teachers must be respected and cared about, and their efforts valued; they must be encouraged to experiment with new strategies over a period of time that allow for meaningful understanding and ease of use. (Walker, 2002) "Immediate test score increase" cannot be used as the only measure of teacher quality.

Supporting teacher academic freedom and maintaining respect for children are the keys to the kind of administration that fosters successful teachers. Moreover, fostering growth by providing professional development also helps sustain this high-quality work. Administrators must be vigilant in securing the resources that support teacher efforts at growth. In this age of collaboration, research and professionalism requires an investment in time and money unlike any in the past. To be exemplary, a teacher must keep moving forward; administrators must believe that as a truism and support it in practice.

### **Conclusion**

The kind of *exemplary teaching* described in this article is a part of the answer to Darling-Hammond's call for "a new kind of teaching." For our students and our schools to be truly effective in this century, it is vital. It is therefore also vital for

school administrators to understand exemplary teaching and to support it through administrative actions and encouragement of appropriate professional development.

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